

# CATHOLICISM AND LIBERALISM

*Contributions to American Public Philosophy*

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1994

First published 1994

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy / edited by  
R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach.

p. cm.

ISBN 0 521 44528 0 (hardback)

1. Catholic Church – Doctrines. 2. Liberalism – United States.

I. Douglass, R. Bruce. II. Hollenbach, David.

BX1396.2.C38 1994

261.7'08'822 – dc20 93-1372 CIP

ISBN 0 521 44528 0 hardback

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## *Introduction*

*R. Bruce Douglass*

Neither as a doctrine nor as a project is the American Proposition a finished thing. Its demonstration is never done once for all; and the Proposition itself requires development on penalty of decadence. Its historical success is never to be taken for granted, nor can it come to some absolute term; and any given measure of success demands enlargement on penalty of decline.

John Courtney Murray, SJ

America, scholars are fond of saying, is a nation that owes its existence to ideas. Perhaps uniquely so. And what they have in mind, of course, when they speak this way are serious ideas – ideas of the sort that find expression in solemn declarations and lend themselves to being characterized as a “philosophy.” It is a paradoxical claim, to be sure, because the way of life that has developed on these shores is scarcely one that has been conducive to philosophical reflection. And it cannot be said that philosophical reflection is an activity held in much respect by Americans, either. But the claim remains true, nonetheless, and it tells us something important about who we are as a people.

For even though we may pride ourselves on being “pragmatic” (as opposed to doctrinaire) and go out of our way to insist that one person’s opinion is as good as the next (almost regardless of who the person is and what the opinions in question are), there is, at the same time, no mistaking the fact that there are some things about which we are *very* principled. We may be disinclined to read philosophical works very much and impatient with the sort of arguments they expound. But our attachment to the cluster of ideas associated with what Abraham Lincoln called the American “proposition” tends to be so strong, in fact, that it borders on religious devotion. For it is simply not the case that we are prepared to treat *those* ideas as though they were just another “point of view.” Far from it: they are, each

one of us learns from an early age, unlike other political ideas, and deserve to be treated differently. We grow up thinking of them, in fact, as the source of all that our country is as a nation and the secret of its success. And because we are inclined to value that success as highly as we do, we assume they deserve to be treated with a special respect – if not, indeed, reverence.

However, for all the loyalty they command in the hearts of the American people, it cannot really be said the ideas in question have a meaning that is altogether clear and beyond dispute. In broad outline, to be sure, we know – and share – what we are affirming when we pledge allegiance to the flag or sing the national anthem. We know what is meant when we hear our country referred to as “democratic,” and we have a pretty good idea, too, of why it is organized the way it is. But at the same time, it does not take much exposure at all to the public life of the United States to see that we vary, too, in myriad ways, in the specific meanings we are inclined to give to key elements of our “public philosophy.” So, for example, the Bill of Rights is read in one way by members of the American Civil Liberties Union and quite another by those who take their cues from Robert Bork. And “liberty and justice for all” has one meaning to members of Jesse Jackson’s “Rainbow Coalition” and quite another to those who identify with Phyllis Schlafly’s “Eagle Forum.”

What at first glance has the appearance, therefore, of being a single coherent body of ideas that binds together the richly varied mix of people who go to make up the population of the United States turns out, on closer inspection, itself to be a complex blend of different strains of thought that reflects the diversity of the nation almost as much as it transcends it. Up to a point, there is a common core of belief that can be identified, but it is subject to such diverse interpretations in different parts of the body politic that it is probably better understood as a meeting ground for conversation than a body of shared convictions.

Nor is this really anything new, either. We tend to be, of course, very much aware these days of the pluralistic character of American society. But all along, ever since the moment when people first began to think seriously about joining the original thirteen colonies into a single nation, our country has been a blend of diverse peoples from different sub-cultures engaged in ongoing deliberation about the meaning and purpose of their life together. And not surprisingly, this has found expression in the terms the nation has chosen to capture its

self-understanding. So ever since the founders first joined the covenantal theology of New England Calvinism to the Enlightenment rationalism of people like Jefferson to produce the premises on which we subsequently have built, the American "proposition" has in reality always been a synthesis of different beliefs drawn from a variety of sources. And even when it has been woven together as skillfully as it was by the founders, it has been subject to diverse readings as different segments of the American people have sought to make it their own.

The ideas in question have also been subject to change. For over the years, as the country has confronted one new challenge after another and found itself having to accommodate a steady succession of new forces, repeatedly the American people have found it necessary to revisit issues that were confronted at the time of the founding. The conversation about who we are as a people and what we stand for in the world has been, therefore, an ongoing one. And one of the principal reasons why the American "experiment" has turned out as well as it has is surely the fact that its people have been as successful as they have at adapting the ideas and practices inherited from their forebears to new circumstances. So even as they have gone about making one far-reaching change in their way of life after another (ranging from the assimilation of successive waves of immigrants to the emancipation of slaves), somehow they have found it possible to do so without breaking faith with the ideas on which the country was founded. In fact, more often than not, they have done so *in the name of fidelity to those ideas*. And the fact that the ideas involved have lent themselves so well to such adaptation has to be considered one of the main reasons why today they enjoy the respect they do.

#### REMAKING OURSELVES, AGAIN

Needless to say, this process is something that continues today. And there is more than one reason to think that the era through which we are now living is destined to be another one in which the United States is going to have to rethink rather fundamentally its identity and purpose. From the recurring agitation (in any number of different quarters) for the adoption of new amendments to the Constitution to the declining hold of the two major political parties on the loyalties of the electorate, increasingly it is apparent that the

ideological ground is shifting once again in American life, and people are feeling the need to rewrite the terms on which our public life is conducted.

Nor is it hard to understand why. For the nation is in the throes of a whole series of profound social and cultural changes that are transforming the conditions under which the American people live their lives. From the increased ethnic and cultural pluralism that we are experiencing and the resulting decline of the social and cultural hegemony previously exercised by WASPs to the revolution that is now underway in the role women play in society, the country is well on its way to becoming, once again, something different from what we have been used to. And as this occurs, it is not in the least surprising that another round of searching questions – and debates – have arisen about just who we are and what we mean to make of ourselves. With the leadership of the nation very much in flux and a whole series of institutions that have been as basic to our way of life as the language that we speak, the schools in which we educate our children, and even marriage and the family undergoing sweeping change, it would be surprising, in fact, if this were not the case.

Especially so, moreover, since at the same time we are having to adjust to changes of comparable magnitude in the wider world, which will almost certainly leave our country in a position quite different from the one to which we have been accustomed. For now that Communism has collapsed in all but a handful of places and the Cold War has come to an end, there is no mistaking the fact that the United States is no longer going to be called upon to play the same sort of hegemonic role in world affairs it has played since the end of World War II. For though it remains a military superpower, it has ceased to be the leader of a military alliance held together by the threat posed by an ideological adversary of comparable might. And even though it continues to be an important economic power, it enjoys nothing like the economic supremacy it once did. If anything, in fact, increasingly it is showing signs of finding it hard to keep up with the competition provided by countries like Germany and Japan.

The more this is so, in turn, and the more the American people find themselves having to contend with the consequences, the more soul-searching it can be expected to produce. For a nation that has gotten used to thinking of itself as preeminent in the world in almost every respect that matters to it is bound to have certain adjustments to make in its self-understanding as it goes about learning, anew, how to



conduct itself as one nation among others. And the more it finds that its fate is being determined by forces beyond its control, the greater the adjustments are likely to be. Already we have had some indication of what this can mean in the inclination on the part of a growing number of people (here and abroad) to dwell on the limits of American power, and the more exposure we have to the difference the emerging new global economy makes in the way that Americans live their lives, the more of an effect the changes now taking place in the world can be expected to have on the way that we as a people conceive of our role in it.

#### THE THREAT OF FRAGMENTATION

Needless to say, the consequence is that a lot is having to be rethought. Especially so, moreover, when it comes to the informal images that we use to flesh out the symbolic meaning and implications of the American "proposition."<sup>1</sup> For it simply is no longer possible to address effectively the challenges we now face on the basis of images that reflect the way the nation *used* to conceive of itself. In part because of the kind of people who are now involved in defining the nation's identity and in part also because of the changed position in which the country now finds itself, they no longer work. So no matter how much nostalgia there may be in some quarters for the day when the United States could still be referred to without fear of contradiction as a "Christian" nation or a "melting pot" or the agency of a "manifest destiny," those days are now gone – for good, presumably. And in their place is emerging what can only be described as a complicated, multi-faceted ongoing process of revision in which little of what such old, familiar images have conveyed is not subject, in one way or another, to change.

Predictably, moreover, this is a process that evokes conflict. Indeed, it is filled with it. For not only are there many people who find it hard to part with the understanding of the American experience reflected in the old images, but those who are prepared to acknowledge the need for change themselves often disagree, too, about the direction it should take. It is one thing to see that the old ways are in need of revision, and quite another to know what deserves to be put in their place. And it is becoming increasingly apparent as the American people come to terms with the deeper issues raised by the changes now taking place in their way of life that there is almost

as much room for disagreement once the need for change is acknowledged as when it is not.

For it is not just “traditionalists” and “progressives” who contend against one another these days to define the meaning and significance of the American experience.<sup>2</sup> It is, also, *different kinds* of “traditionalists” and “progressives” contending *against one another* – which each tend to have their own distinctive way of viewing things.<sup>3</sup> That is why our public life is as complex as it is today and why, too, the so-called “culture wars” that have been breaking out as these differences have been joined are not likely to issue in any sort of clear, decisive victory for one “side” or the other.

But precisely for that reason, in turn, the thing that one has to worry about is the absence of any sort of real resolution of the issues that are now being raised as this struggle unfolds. For fragmentation is, in its own way, every bit as much a threat to the health and well-being of a society of the sort the United States is now becoming as polarization. Indeed, we would argue that it is much more the real and present danger that it faces today. This nation is not going to split apart; and neither are the American people likely to square off in anything like a real *Kulturkampf*. But what we could do is splinter in a manner that prevents the attainment of anything like the sort of coherent vision of the nation’s purpose that is almost certainly going to be needed if we are to address our present problems effectively.

Indeed, it is what we are already doing, to a considerable extent. So instead of attempting to engage one another in any sort of real dialogue, the partisans of the different visions that now contend for influence in American life are inclined to separate themselves off into distinct social and cultural enclaves and then to attack and stigmatize one another from a distance. And even though they each invoke the American “proposition” in one form or another, they call upon it in such different – and polemical – ways that it ends up being much more a symbol of what divides us than anything we have in common.

Not surprisingly, the result is that people then tend to find it difficult to work together. So no matter what may be said about our need as a society to “pull together,” the public life of the nation increasingly has just the opposite quality. It is given over, that is, to a competitive struggle for particular partisan and/or sectional interests, and anything which does not happen to lend itself to being pursued on those terms – including the solution of some of the most pressing and difficult problems we face – ends up being sacrificed.

## THE ALTERNATIVE OF ENGAGEMENT

In order for the drift in this direction to be halted, however, we will need to do more than just recognize that this is the case. Such awareness is in fact very much needed and part of our purpose in this book is to promote it. But as a practical matter not much can be expected to change unless the partisans of the various different interests – and creeds – that now contend against one another in the public life of our nation also come to be convinced that it is in fact possible to deal with their differences in some other, more constructive way. And in particular not much is likely to change unless they discover that something constructive can come of *engaging* one another over their differences.

Pursuit of that possibility is, in turn, what this book is about. No one can say with any certainty that it does in fact exist, to be sure. But we think that the reasons people commonly have for *assuming* (and that is what it tends to be – assumption) otherwise are not nearly as compelling as they are often thought to be. Indeed, our sense is that just the opposite is true: they are not compelling at all. And in the pages that follow we seek to show that is so, exploring at some length the prospects for constructive engagement in the case of an ideological difference that has to be considered one of the more difficult and sensitive ones facing us today.

It also happens to be a difference that can be expected to matter a great deal in the conduct of public affairs in our society in the years ahead. Indeed, it could well turn out to matter so much that it ends up being of pivotal importance in determining the course that events take. For it involves two currents of thought that not only are among the more influential forces at work today shaping the cultural life of the United States, but would appear, also, to have a real future ahead of them.

Indeed, the prospects they both have for enlarging their already considerable influence on the thinking of Americans in the years ahead are so promising (albeit for different reasons) that (some) partisans on both sides have been led to entertain the idea that each of them may now be on its way to becoming a dominant cultural influence. Hence the talk we have been hearing of late from some who consider themselves moral and political “liberals” about their way of thinking having finally arrived as *the* public philosophy of the West.<sup>4</sup> And in a comparable vein, hence the talk we have been hearing, too,

from proponents of the new role that Catholics are now coming to play in the mainstream of American life about a "Catholic moment," now in the making, that will revitalize the religious roots of American public life.<sup>5</sup>

Even if one believes, moreover (as we do), that claims of this sort exaggerate the significance of the trends on which they are based, there is no mistaking the element of truth in what they suggest. For the trends themselves do exist, of course. And they do lead in the direction that, *broadly*, claims of this sort suggest. Liberalism *is* indeed today enjoying a real renaissance in American life (not to speak of elsewhere in the world), and barring unforeseen developments, it can be expected to enjoy the fruits of that renaissance for years to come. But so, too, is Catholicism. As a result of the process of change set in motion over a quarter of a century ago by Vatican Council II, the church has become a very different institution from the one that it used to be. And the changes that it has undergone (which are by no means yet over), along with the "coming of age" that Catholics have been experiencing in our country in the period since John Kennedy was elected to the presidency, have made Catholicism into much more of a force to contend with than ever it has been before in the affairs of the nation. So much so, in fact, that it is hard to imagine it ever being again anything other than a significant factor in determining the way the nation's affairs are conducted.

#### AN ENCOUNTER IN THE MAKING

The fact, too, that the church in the United States is becoming as deliberate and outspoken as it is about applying Catholic social teaching to the affairs of the nation,<sup>6</sup> combined with the related consideration that that teaching is itself now a great deal more relevant to the affairs of democratic societies than it has been in the past, only makes it all the more likely that what we now have in store for us is an increasingly explicit encounter of liberalism and Catholicism as distinct intellectual *traditions*. The insistence on the part of liberals that their way of thinking deserves to be recognized as the *de facto* public philosophy of America, combined with the equally firm insistence on the part of Catholics that the way of thinking they favor should now count for something in shaping the nation's identity, makes it almost certain, in fact, that this is the direction in which we are headed.

What is *not* certain, however, we would propose, is the form that this encounter is going to take. And that is fortunate. For what we have seen to date in their interaction has not been (to put it mildly) exactly encouraging. With few exceptions, the occasions when liberals and Catholics have had to deal with one another over matters of principle in the public life of this nation in recent years have been conspicuous for just the sort of antagonism and alienation that make for "culture wars." And if that is all we have to look forward to as Catholics and liberals come increasingly into interaction with one another in the years ahead, it does not bode at all well for the future of our public life.

But things need not turn out this way, we think, and for reasons that have to do with more than just the external pressures that will be brought to bear on liberals and Catholics alike to temper their mutual distrust. For it simply is not the case, we are convinced, that they *have* to be as antagonistic to one another as they have tended to be in recent memory. Especially not at the point where we are *now*. There was a time, to be sure, when such antagonism made good sense. In fact, it was probably unavoidable. For it was a natural result of what both liberalism and Catholicism were. But those days are over. *Both traditions have changed*: they have undergone, in fact, a whole series of changes that have had the effect of redefining rather fundamentally what they stand for. And in the process, of course, a good bit of what is at issue between them has changed as well.

Indeed, so much has changed that, in some respects at least, their relationship is now almost the opposite of what it used to be. For the church is hardly any more the bastion of reaction it once was. Especially not in the United States. Nor is liberalism the unambiguously progressive force it used to be, either (not with its proponents celebrating the *status quo* as they now are inclined to do). Both of them have come a long way, and in the process they have come a lot closer to one another as well. So much so, in fact, that on any number of matters that are of real consequence they now deserve to be thought of much more as allies than as adversaries.<sup>7</sup>

The only reason, moreover, why it is not more recognized that this is the case, we would submit, is myopia born of the heat generated by the "culture wars." The partisans in particular have a hard time appreciating how much has in fact changed because, on both sides, they have allowed themselves to become obsessed with certain particularly divisive issues on which they continue to have deep,

abiding differences. And because they *both* have been given to dwelling single-mindedly on those matters – abortion, for example – to the neglect of almost everything else, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to keep in mind that there might be other things that can – and do – matter to them as well. Especially things that matter to them as *much*. So in a classic illustration of the kind of ideologically motivated simplification that has been the curse of American public life in recent years, they have allowed themselves to be defined by their differences, even though this has meant the neglect, if not the denial, of much of what they in fact really are.

#### THE PRECEDENT OF MUTUAL LEARNING

In suggesting that there is more to the relationship between liberals and Catholics than what now divides them, we do not mean to minimize, of course, the importance of those differences. But what we do intend to do is put them in perspective, and in particular to underscore the need for them to be viewed in *historical* perspective. When they are seen in that light, we would propose, the divisions no longer look the same at all. And this is not just because they cease to be the whole story. For what one also discovers by being at all familiar with the history of the interaction between the two traditions is that *they have had fundamental differences in the past that they have successfully resolved*.

Most of what can now be characterized as the common ground they now occupy is, in fact, a product, in one form or another, of the resolution of just such differences. Everything from the outspoken support that Catholics are now giving to the idea of human rights to the current liberal concern with considerations of distributive (or what Catholics used to call “social”) justice is a product of long, difficult struggles in which each of them has, in effect, learned from quarreling with arguments advanced by the other (among others).<sup>8</sup> And it has been only their willingness to engage in such learning – and make the necessary adjustments in previously held positions – that has enabled them to arrive at those positions.

The lesson of their own history, therefore, is that mutual learning is in fact possible even in the face of fundamental differences of opinion. There *can* be successful dialogue among people who find themselves disagreeing in principle even on matters of “ultimate” importance – dialogue that changes the way the people involved end

up looking at things. If there is anything that gives the lie to the notion that all that we can do is “agree to disagree,” the history that is explored in this book is it. And it is a history, we would submit, that bears close scrutiny by all interested parties for precisely this reason.

The fact, moreover, that so much progress has already been made in this regard makes the frequently drawn conclusion that all that is left for liberals and Catholics to do is do battle against one another all the more anomalous. For it can hardly be said that the differences they have faced – and overcome – in years past have been any less serious than those that divide them today. In fact, if anything, just the reverse is true. And the meeting of minds that they have already achieved should only make it easier for them to be able to appreciate – and respect – one another’s arguments.

Even more, it should enable them to appreciate their common need for the kind of conversation that is the source of such agreement. For neither of them would be at all what they are today – or *where* they are, either, for that matter – without it. It is no exaggeration at all, in fact, to say that it is precisely the capacity that both liberals and Catholics have shown over the years to accommodate and even learn from other points of view (whether it be Aristotle or Adam Smith or Karl Marx) that has been the secret of their success. It is the reason why they are still standing and even flourishing when so many of their erstwhile competitors have long since ceased to be viable. And by the same token, it is also the reason why they have a future ahead of them.

#### THE CONTINUING NEED

But the desirability of learning from one’s opponents is something, at the same time, which is very easily lost sight of. No matter how much one may have benefited from the experience, the temptation is great to ignore it, and to act as though there were no need for it. And particularly no need in the future: the last thing that those who have succeeded sometimes want to acknowledge is that they might yet have something more to learn from those with whom they remain in competition. For to do so is to concede not only that one’s own thinking might still be wanting, but also that there might actually be some truth in what others have to say.

But difficult as that may be to admit, it is even more difficult to deny. For no matter what success movements like liberalism and Catholicism have experienced in meeting past challenges, it is hardly

ever the case that they have learned all they need to learn. Nor is this just because life goes on and is forever posing new challenges; the deeper reason is the partiality of the learning that goes on. And even more fundamentally, it is the partiality of the point of view that is reflected in even the best of what they have to offer.

For as the history of modern ideologies shows, every one of them is the reflection of a particular sort of experience (and a particular sort of person, typically, as well). And no matter how much they may attempt to adapt and revise what they stand for in order to take into account a larger range of human experience, they always end up seeing things *from a particular point of view*.<sup>9</sup> They cannot do otherwise. For they are what they are by virtue of seeing things in that way. And that means, in turn, that they cannot help but learn selectively, so that there are some features of human experience whose significance they are in a better position to grasp than others.

So even though the Catholic church, for example, has made enormous strides in coming to terms with the challenge presented by the democratic aspirations that find expression in contemporary thinking about human rights, it has hardly learned all that it needs to learn in that respect. Especially with regard to the status of women it still has, needless to say, a long way to go. And one can clearly see in the Catholic hierarchy's struggle with the challenge posed by contemporary feminism continuing evidence of the same habits of mind that in the past prevented the church from appreciating the human promise of democratic aspirations. So what it has learned in that regard it has obviously learned in an incomplete way, and it still has a lot to overcome. And as it struggles to do that, it can hardly dispense with the stimulus provided by the kind of pointed and insistent affirmation of the rights of the human person that finds expression these days in liberalism.

But in like manner, liberals continue to need exposure to the kind of principled affirmation of the import of attending to the *common good* that finds expression in the witness and teaching of the church. For even though liberals have come a long way in appreciating the need for the assumption of collective responsibility for social outcomes, they still have an unmistakable ambivalence about doing so. So even though economic individualism in the old "rugged" form that they used to champion is gone, it still persists in a new, modified form that ends up yielding no little human misery. And even though many liberals are now committed in principle to overcoming that misery, in



practice they have a hard time taking the steps that would be necessary to make it happen – which is why, after years of talk, poverty is still so much a reality in the United States today.<sup>10</sup>

Even more do they tend to have a hard time, moreover, doing what it would take to enhance the quality of the way of life we share in more fundamental ways. For apart from the value they are inclined to place on material well-being and personal liberty, they are not much prepared to enter into a serious discussion of what it is that constitutes the human good. And even less are they prepared to pursue it actively. So even as it becomes (painfully) evident that it is going to take more than just a combination of prosperity and freedom to bring about a truly *good* society, they shy away from saying – or doing – much of anything about it.<sup>11</sup> In particular, they tend to shy away from anything approaching the sort of critical reflection on how we should use the opportunities now available to us that will be the *sine qua non* of any successful attempt to resolve the issues of meaning and purpose that are increasingly surfacing in our public life.<sup>12</sup>

#### FROM CIVILITY, VISION

So there is still plenty of room for further learning, on both sides. And a good part of what lies ahead, in turn, in this book is given over to mapping out just where that is. In chapters that take up subjects as diverse as the prospects for the family as an institution, the role of women in society (and the church), the fate of human rights in the church, and the effect of relying on market economies on both our politics and our cultural life, those of us who have been a part of the project that produced this book seek to show where liberals and Catholics might beneficially continue to learn from one another in the years that lie ahead.

The thing above all, moreover, that we hope emerges from the analysis presented in these chapters is a clear sense of what there is to be gained from doing so. And not merely for liberalism and Catholicism themselves, either. Part of the argument made in the pages that follow is, of course, that both traditions themselves have something to gain from continuing their mutual learning: not only will each of them have more of a capacity to influence the course of events, but there will also be, we believe, a further enrichment of what they themselves intrinsically are. Mutual learning presents them both with an opportunity to *grow*, and in ways that could make